

### Do Not Look at the Paper: Imagine It!

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" was translated to the screen in 1989 by the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) in the form of a mini-series. Both forms tell a similar story and do a fine job of telling a story, although there are many differences as well. These differences can cause varying insights whether one is a reader or viewer. Just like the main character in Gilman's story lacks freedom of choice due to her controlling husband, so does a viewer when a story has been adapted to the screen.

In "The Yellow Wallpaper," Gilman tells the story of a confined woman who is controlled for her own safety by her husband, John. This confinement causes her downfall as she begins finding herself falling deeper and deeper into a fantasy. The story revolves around the room that John has chosen to be their master bedroom in the home that they have inhabited for the summer. The narrator believes that trapped behind the stripes of yellow on her wallpaper is a woman who parallels her own imprisonment, and she becomes obsessed with her escape. The representation takes over as she feels the bars grabbing hold of her as well. All of her thoughts are overcome and she soon devises a plan to help the woman on the wall escape. She tears and rips at the paper, trying harder and harder to free the miserable woman behind it. John's repressive behavior increases with her obsession, and her need for freedom turns her mental state to one of anxiety and unsteadiness. Her eventual breakdown is seen as the story concludes with her crawling over the body of her passed out husband, almost animal like in her movements and thoughts.

This storyline is, of course, carried through completely in the film version. John is still controlling, she is still sneaking to write in her journal, and the wallpaper is still an incredibly overwhelming thing. This is the case with most stories that are turned into films, although not all. The mood intended by Gilman is present in both settings, and that is quite important. However, there are many differences as well.

Perhaps one of the most important, yet seemingly small differences, is the name given to the narrator in the movie, Charlotte. She never names herself throughout the written story. The choice not to name a main character of a story is a big one and most likely was very well thought out by Gilman. A no-named character becomes an everyman, giving readers the ability to relate because they could just as easily be this person as anyone

else. The writers of the film not only chose to name the narrator, but the name they chose for her was the same as the writer of the original story's name. This immediately takes away the idea that this is an everyman story and makes it appear to the viewer as the story of Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Although there is some indication that the story in some ways mirrors Gilman's life, she has never intended the story to be an autobiography of herself. This name choice puts thoughts into the viewer's head only moments into the movie and begins to close the mind to all that could be learned from this character.

Another difference includes names again, but this time names of other characters. The baby, who in the movie is not seen as a newborn but as a toddler, is given the name James. He is mentioned and seen much more often in the movie than in the story as well. The idea that a woman who has just had a baby only refers to her child as the baby and no more than three times is significant in the story. It shows the distance the narrator has from her child and is the argument many have used for this being an early story about post-partum depression. The movie makes the child older, which makes that theory seem less likely. Also, Charlotte has a designated time with the baby each day, and the child calling for his mother all make their relationship seem much less distant.

Many other characters are introduced into the house during the film than in the story. There are more house maids as well as visits from family and friends and another doctor, Dr. Stark. These new visitors make the house seem much livelier, and make Charlotte's fall into hysterics seem much more of an illness that is deep within instead of one that is almost forced upon her as it is hinted in the story.

In Karen Ford's article, "The Yellow Wallpaper' and Women's Discourse," she discusses what she believes was Gilman's intent for the story to be relatable to anyone, "Yet, many details, like the narrator's lack of a name, argue against her individuality, and similarly, the primer-like names of the husband and sister-in-law--John and Mary--suggest they are merely representatives for Husbands and In-laws" (309). Ford backs up the idea that this story was meant to be faceless and yet the movie immediately gives names, faces, tendencies and even forced opinions onto the viewer, almost completely eliminating this very important aspect of the story.

Another significant thing missing from the film is the importance of the journal. It is made clear, very clear, actually, that Charlotte is not to be writing. The movie even adds a scene where she has snuck into the library and spent the day, gasp, reading. However, the journal is secondary and tells very little of the story. What is read is almost always a jumble of things and never straight from the text, combining the least important of her feelings together into a short writing session and leaving the ones that impact the story most to be acted out.

In the film, John's character takes on an immensely important role. He is, of course, important to the written story as well; he is, as is said over and over in both text and in film, a doctor and a husband. It is told to Charlotte over and over that she is neglecting her family duties as a wife and that John's role is first a doctor, hers included, and then a husband. The film, however, gives us much insight into John. He is a bit twisted in his relationship with Charlotte, adoring her in a pet-like way but also ignoring her thoughts and needs and getting quite angry at times. We also see him away from Charlotte, talking to those in the house, other doctors and even giving his speech at the end. We almost get to know more facets of John than we do Charlotte. In the text we learn everything through the narrator. So we know her the most and we only need to know the basics about everyone else. This takes us back to the relatable characters; the film again makes this almost impossible.

Continuing with John, the story keeps their relationship very on the surface. He chooses the upstairs room because if they had taken another room there wouldn't be "room for two beds, and no near room for him if he took another" (Gilman 138). This certainly doesn't sound like a very romantic man or a very emotionally-charged relationship. In the film version, they share a bed, and John insists on dancing and even attempts to be sexual with Charlotte on more than one occasion. This seems to be directly opposite of what the story intends. The narrator is designed to be almost a slave to her husband who commanded in her everyday to obey his rules and do as he says. She is his subordinate, and although this is shown throughout the film, John's character is softened into a sweet husband who is only trying to do what is best for his sick wife. In the text, it appears that John is more concerned in being right and being the ruler than in her safety.

Another important difference between the two works is that in the film, Charlotte is depicted as truly ill and in many ways resigned to the treatment that is required, where the text shows her fighting it continually. In both, she states that she does not quite agree, and in both cases, she rebels, but watching the story unfold gives the viewer the impression that Charlotte is in need of help. She is staring at her husband while he sleeps, sneaking into her child's room at night, breaking into libraries, sneaking around with a journal, throwing tantrums and not sleeping properly. In the story, she explains that she is forced into her obsession because of her treatment, not because of her nervous condition. She admits things bother her, but is brushed aside when she mentions them to her husband. Eventually she stops telling others what she feels and holds everything inside, eventually driving herself into a state much worse than any she may have originally had.

Another interesting idea brought up by Lorelee MacPike in her article, "Environment as Psychopathological Symbolism in 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" is that the room chosen to keep the narrator tells the reader much about her place in society and in her home. MacPike

describes the room, “a former nursery, whose major features are ancient yellow wallpaper, bars on the windows, and a huge bedstead nailed to the floor” (287). She describes this room as her prison due to the bars and says that the fact that it was a nursery at one time shows what is really thought of the narrator. She is “legally a child; socially, economically, and philosophically she must be led by an adult” (287). She also discusses the nailed down bed as a symbol of the narrator’s sexuality, “thus denying her this outlet for her energies just as the bars deny her physical movement and the nursery her adult abilities” (287).

Perhaps the most significant difference between the text and the film is the significance of the wallpaper. It has been left to discuss now for two reasons; one, it is the most significant part of the story, and two it is almost forgotten in the film. The paper, as MacPike says, “may well be the only part of her life she can control” (288). She uses the paper to stimulate her mind; it is her only way to get around all that is forbidden of her. In the text the paper is mentioned immediately, frequently and obsessively. In the movie, it is barely hinted at until the end. The obsession in the film seems to be centered around Charlotte in general and not specifically to the wallpaper until the last moments. Watching the film also takes away the imagined views of the woman behind the stripes. She is no longer seen as an animated image that slowly moves, slowly haunts, slowly lures the narrator in. Instead it shocks her, surprises her and is instantly real to the viewer. It is almost hard to believe that it has been Charlotte imagining herself all along during the film; instead, it almost gives the idea of a ghost. The text gives hints that are hard to decipher until the end but allows the reader to imagine the narrator creeping all along.

A reader is always given the freedom to imagine. This is the glory of the written word; it can be seen and taken special by each who opens its pages. Film is much more concrete. Little is left to the imagination, and little is left up to the viewer. Just as the narrator is restricted to her prison-like room and given a list of her daily activities, so is a viewer told what to see and how to see it. The visuals provided by a film are often interesting and informative, but the harm they often cause to the original text and the intent of the writer is significant. Just as the narrator is trapped and pushed into her insanity, so is a viewer pushed toward a certain belief due to the images presented on the screen.

## Works Cited

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